

POLICY AND NEED CONTROVERSY: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE USE OF ENGLISH/IGBO FOR INSTRUCTION IN SENIOR PRIMARY GRADES IN EASTERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper assessed the use of English language as a language of instruction (LoI) in senior primary school in Eastern Nigeria. This aimed at ascertaining if the Igbo language should be used in senior grades of primary schools in the teaching of science subjects contrary to the policy directive that the English language should be used. The possible consequences of this at this are exposed. The descriptive method was adopted as the survey research design and for the analysis of data. As sampling is fundamental in survey research, the purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of schools and teachers for the study. The study found out that only English language is used in grades 4 to 6 as the language of instruction in the selected schools; that the use of only English language has negative impacts on the students, namely: reducing their interests, hindering their understanding of science subjects, and contributing to poor performance in these subjects. The study revealed that the language of instruction can be facilitated and improved upon (whether indigenous or foreign) if teachers could be occasionally retrained in relevant languages to make science more practical.

KEYWORDS: Language of Instruction, Science Subjects, Policy, Needs, Igbo Language, English Language

INTRODUCTION

Education is the acquisition of worthwhile knowledge in a worth-while medium of instruction. Formulating a worth-while policy without considering issues of medium of instruction can be likened to loading a precious object in a lorry without tyres. Since the lorry cannot move without tyres, the precious object will definitely not get to its destination.

Governments of different countries often come up with different language policies where need be. In Nigeria, according to Aito (2005), official language policies have variously been enunciated in documents such as the National Policy on Education, (severally revised) as in the 1976 constitution of the Nation. This effort aimed at formulating an appropriate language policy that encompasses both the indigenous and the colonial language, considering language in all human transactions as the hallmark of the people's life and culture (Balogun, 2013). Culture therefore, as the totality of people's way of life entails the people's informal and formal education. The two forms of education are needed for the propagation and continuation of the people's culture, as well as, for the propagation and enhancement of activities.

For the use of native language in carrying out different activities, Adegoju (2009) posits that UNESCO ranked Africa on the International Mother Language Day as 'Linguistically the least known continent' as most of its local

languages are not adequately mobilized and empowered for nation building. Thus in some Africa countries, the English language still has dominance over most indigenous languages to the extent of their endangerment. This dominance was actually put in place by the colonialists as their legacy through giving their language unnecessary instructional value. Explaining the place of our indigenous languages in relation to the English language, Danladi (2013, p.12) affirms that

Language roles (especially the local languages) parallel along the embodiment of culture, lead to the depth of a person's reflection beyond practical necessities of life to such aspects as the search for knowledge, education and collaboration among multi-ethnic societies. In such a way, it revealed how English language continues to operate signs and elaborate functions in almost all facts of Nigeria's life.

The fact that the English language is turning to an international language cannot be ignored. But, the indigenous languages are very important also as no meaning education can be attained without the environment. Bandele (2015, p.58) states that 'in order to effect meaningful interaction leading to optimal student's achievement in mathematics...excellence in schools, the environment need be examined'. Thus, indigenous languages were meant to be the language of instruction from pre-primary to junior primary level in Nigerian school system. But, the reverse is the case as most schools use English language at all levels.

It has been argued that the recognition given to English language in the national language policy is not healthy for the development of indigenous languages and for the teaching of science subjects since children learn better when taught in their indigenous languages, Babaci-Wilhite & Geo-Jaja (2014) and Babaci-Wilhite (2014). But Egonwa (2010, p.15) asks, "... How many of these many languages are developed enough to make science and technology instruction feasible?" Egonwa thus affirms that this makes the advocacy of Owolabi & Makinde (2008) on the tenacity of using mother tongue for science instruction in Nigeria impracticable. But, this is not totally acceptable in the case of some indigenous languages including Igbo language. Agreeably though, some indigenous languages are not yet as developed as some others, but the use of any language adds to its value and development. Counting the woes of underdevelopment of any language is not as useful as making use of such a language to improve on its value. Igbo language is developed to the extent that it is taught in all classes at primary and secondary levels of the educational system in Nigeria. How then can it be stated that it is not developed enough for the teaching of science and technology in higher primary levels? If it is taught, why can't it be used as language of instruction

This paper assesses the use of English language as a language of instruction in science subjects from grade 4 to 6 in primary schools in Eastern Nigeria. Even when English language is used as the language of instruction, pupils at these levels have recorded poor performance in both science subjects and in English language for a relatively long time in both internal and external examination. Obuasi (2014a, p.79) states that this is because 'majority of the teachers ... prefer teaching in English (the type they can speak)'... even 'when their competency and proficiency in English were poor'. This worsens the situation as the children get more intimidated, withdrawn, and less creative, Babaci-Wilhite & Geo-Jaja (2014).

Objective of the Study

The study hinges on assessing the efficacy of the use of the English language as LoI in the teaching of science subjects in senior primary levels in Eastern Nigeria with the following specific objectives:

- To ascertain the language of instruction in senior primary levels (grades 4 to 6);
- To identify the extent to which the language of instruction aid the children in the learning of science subjects.
- To find out how the teaching and learning of science subjects can be improved by the use of appropriate language of instruction.

Research Questions

- What is the language of instruction used for the teaching of science subjects in schools?
- To what extent does the language of instruction aid the children in the learning of science subjects?
- How can the medium of instruction be improved to aid the teaching and learning of science subjects

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on senior primary levels Eastern Nigeria. The target population is pupils in grades 4 to 6. The investigation focused mainly on the language of instruction used by teachers in the teaching of science subjects

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Theoretical Studies

Primary or basic education is the first level of education and the bottom line education upon which all other educational structures are erected and without which, none can stand (Musa, 2012). It is at the primary school that the child comes in contact with the basic education with its attendant philosophy. The goal of basic education in Nigeria, as excerpts from the National Policy of Education, according to Udosen (2013, p.3) include to:

- Develop in the entire citizenry a strong consciousness for education and a strong promotion;
- Reduce drastically the incidents of drop-out from the formal school system; and
- Ensure the acquisition of appropriate level of literary, manipulative, communicative and life skills as well as the ethical, moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life.

The above robust goals cannot be accomplished without a well thought out and formulated curriculum based on appropriate medium of instruction which lean on the use of an appropriate language. Nwajuba & Okereke (2008, p.181) adds that, “this is because language is the eye with which human beings see and interpret the world around them, while Nwadike (2006) posits that, “Language makes it possible for people to transmit knowledge across space and time”. Explaining the role English language plays in our school system, Udosen (2013) observes that there have been reactions and counter reactions on what most people view as imposition of another group’s languages on the people, an exhibition of language loyalty by different language communities which conspired to render the indigenous languages impotent. The opposition to this imposition makes the people prefer their children taught in English language, Obuasi (2014). Bamgbose (1989) decries the introduction of formal education and the adoption of English language as the language of instruction as instrumental to the decline of the use of indigenous languages as the language of instruction in primary schools in Nigeria. Likewise, the nonchalant attitude of Nigerians towards their local languages also contributed to the decline. It should be noted that Nigeria as a multilingual nation needs to have some of her indigenous languages emerge as national languages in practice as obtains in other multilingual nations like India, lest using the English language as stipulated by the language policy may continue even when it does not yield the desired result. But Adegbite (2008, p.13) reports that:

A national assessment of the Universal Basic Education Programme (UBEP) was conducted in June 2003 to test the achievement of pupils in Primary 4, 5, and 6 in four subjects English, Mathematics, Primary Science and Social Studies. The result... indicates poor performances of pupils in all the subjects taught via the medium of English.

Thus, this calls for a rethink on the policy as the pupils failed in the four subjects, and even more surprising is the fact that they failed the English language which was the language of instruction. In the light of this, this paper focuses on assessing the use of English language as a language of instruction Nigeria with a view to find out if teachers in higher grades in primary school have started using the indigenous language in teaching sciences; what has influenced the mass failure as reported above; and if the mass failure in these science subjects continued despite the use of English language as a medium of instruction.

Empirical Studies

Scholars have delved into critical assessments and analysis of language policies of different countries of the world. In Africa and other part of the world with multilingualism, the issue has always been blamed and counter blamed on the imposition of one language or the other. In Nigeria, the blame is focused on two issues, the imposition of the three major Nigeria languages (Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba) on the minority languages and on the imposition of English as the language of instruction in the school system. Omodiagbe's (1992) study focused on the history of English language in Nigeria as a product of evangelical expediency that served for evangelization work. So the schools were adjuncts of the church which made the English taught simply functional and utilitarian. Thus, in 1920, Philips-Stokes, an American philanthropist, saw the exclusion of local languages in the education system as inhuman, and so recommended the teaching of indigenous languages alongside the English language.

Another study by Nwajiuba & Okereke (2008) explored the relevance of the use of the language of the immediate environment in teaching at pre-primary and primary schools in Nigeria. They found that the child stands to benefit a lot from indigenous language as the child is at home with the language of immediate environment both in the school and elsewhere. This is in line with the results of most of Babaci-Wilhite studies in Tanzania – an African country.

METHODS

The descriptive survey design was adopted for this study. Primary schools in the five states of Eastern Nigeria that are Igbo speaking were used for the study. Two schools were randomly selected from four of the states (Anambra, Abia, Enugu, and Imo, while one was selected from Ebonyi for the convenience of the researchers to make up nine schools for the research. Eight teachers were selected from each school to have seventy-two teachers. The instruments for data collection were questionnaire and oral interview. Seventy-two (72) questionnaires were distributed by hand and collected through the same process. Two teachers were interviewed in each school, thus a total of 18 teachers were interviewed in the 9 schools. Descriptive approach was used in the analysis of all the data collected in this research. The mean (\bar{x}) and percentage (%) were used in the analysis. A mean of 2.50 ($\bar{x}= 2.50$) is deemed acceptable (A) while any score below that is deemed rejected (R).

RESULTS

This section presents and analyses data used in this study under the following:

- Medium of instruction used in grades 4 to 6;
- The impact of the use of English language as language of instruction;
- How the use of language of instruction in senior primary levels can be improved.

Table 1: Language of Instruction Used in Grades 4 to 6

S/No	Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Ef \bar{x}	\bar{x}	Decision
1	The medium of instruction in grades 4 to 6 is the English language.	36 5%	21 29%	4 6%	11 15%	72	3.10	Accepted
2	The medium of instruction is Igbo language.	10 14%	14 19%	31 43%	17 24%	72	2.20	Rejected
3	The medium of instruction is a blend of English language and Igbo language.	13 18%	16 22%	12 17%	31 43%	72	2.15	Rejected
4	No other medium of instruction is used in teaching science subjects.	29 40%	18 25%	19 26%	6 8%	72	3.00	Accepted
Avg. Total		22	17	17	16	72	2.61	Accepted

The data in the above table indicate that the propositions contained were accepted as it recorded $\bar{x} = 2.61$ which is above the criterion mean $\bar{x} = 2.50$. In the table items 1 and 4 were accepted (A) while items 2 and 3 were rejected (A subjects in grades 4 to 6.). The respondents therefore affirm that the English language is the major medium of instruction in teaching science subjects. Igbo language were neither used as a medium of instruction alone nor used alongside their English language in teaching science.

Table 2: The impact of the Use of English Language as Language of Instruction

S/No	Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Ef \bar{x}	\bar{x}	Decision
5	Teaching science subjects in English helps the pupils understand the subjects better.	15 20%	9 12%	18 25%	30 42%	72	2.13	Rejected
6	English language as a medium has no significant impact in the teaching and learning of science subjects	22 30%	27 38%	13 18%	10 14%	72	2.85	Accepted
7	Using a foreign language contributes to poor performance in science subjects.	41 56%	16 22%	7 10%	8 11%	72	3.25	Accepted
8	The use of English language hinders the learning of science subjects in schools.	32 44%	24 33%	8 11%	8 11%	72	3.11	Accepted
Avg. Total		28	19	12	14	72	2.84	Accepted

The data in table 2 above show that the propositions contained were accepted as the average total of $\bar{x} = 2.84$ was got. Item 5, 6, 7 and 8 score $\bar{x} = 2.13$, $\bar{x} = 2.85$, $\bar{x} = 3.25$ and $\bar{x} = 3.11$ respectively. The respondents stated that the English language used as the language of instruction did not help the pupils to understand science subjects better. It therefore did not make much positive impact in teaching science (items 6) as poor performance has been recorded in science subjects - (items 7). The respondents therefore agreed in item 8 that the use of English language as a language of instruction hinders/retards the learning of science subjects. This goes in line with Adegbite's (2008) report cited above, and confirms the poor performance can still be attributed to the use of foreign language even when the language is the National Official language.

Table 3: How the Language of Instruction in Senior Grades can be Improved

S/No	Items	SA (4)	A (3)	D (2)	SD (1)	Ef \bar{x}	\bar{x}	Decision
9	It can be enhanced if teachers are trained in languages – English and Igbo.	26 36%	21 29%	16 22%	9 26%	72	2.89	Accepted
10	It can be improved if English and Igbo languages are jointly used in teaching of science.	22 31%	30 42%	14 19%	6 8%	72	2.94	Accepted
11	Teaching science subjects in Igbo language would create interest in learning science and so improve interest in the language	33 46%	27 38%	3 4%	9 12%	72	3.17	Accepted
12	It can be improved if the indigenous language is used to enhance practicals in science classes.	28 39%	31 43%	6 8%	7 10%	72	3.11	Accepted
Avg. Total		27	27	10	8	72	3.03	Accepted

In above table, the propositions were accepted in all the items contained in the table, as all the items scored higher than the criterion mean. The average total score of the items in this table is \bar{x} -3.03. The items 9, 10, 11, and 12 have the mean scores of \bar{x} -2.89, \bar{x} -2.94, \bar{x} -3.17, and \bar{x} -3.11 respectively. These indicate that there is room for improvement in the language of instruction for senior primary grade science subjects, if the propositions are followed.

Discussion of Findings

English language occupies an influential position in the formation of national expectations and integration. No doubt, this is necessary, but should not be at the expense of the needs of the people. For science to thrive, it has to be situated to an environment which demands appropriate language of the language. This study found out that English language is used in the teaching of science subjects at the senior primary levels as stipulated by the Nigerian language policy. The teachers interviewed who pledge anonymous, stated that they were teaching science subjects using English language as the medium of instruction because the “orders above stated so”. Most of them indicated interest in using the two languages jointly for science subjects which this paper sees as most appropriate for sustainable science development.

The teachers interviewed did not believe that the use of the English language as the language of instruction has any added advantage over the use of the indigenous language. Their views are represented in Table 2 in line with Adegbite's (2008) report on UBEP studies of achievement tests for pupils in senior primary which found out that most of pupils in his study failed mathematics, science and social studies. This means that the situation has not changed just as the policy has not changed. The interviewees however believed that the language of instruction can be improved if teachers are retrained well in the two languages, and if the Igbo language is used alongside the English language in teaching science subjects. They also believe that using Igbo language and English language with instructional materials practically would improve the teaching of science subjects. Thus the major conclusion is that using English language as the only language of instruction has not promoted the teaching and learning of science subjects in senior primary levels, thus has no added advantage. Science is a study of the environment and environments are best studied with the language of same environment. But as the Nigerian science curriculum is Eurocentric, the use of English may not be ruled out. A combination of two languages – English and an indigenous language (in this case Igbo) would be the best option for now until the science curriculum goes more Nigeria centric.

CONCLUSIONS

Though English language has played many roles in Nigeria, the conclusion from this research is that most children fail different subjects including English even when they are taught in English. Based on the findings of this study, a suggestion of using Igbo language as a language of instruction at all grades in primary schools in the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria is advocated which can be extended to other language environments of other multilingual environments.

A better option would be to have English and Igbo used jointly used from grade 4 to 6 at the primary levels. Though this option is for the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria as the area of the research, it can equally be applicable to other indigenous language environments, if we wish to give science subjects the good base they deserve.

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